

The Importance of the Ten Commandments

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“Therefore you shall be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you...” (Deuteronomy 5:32).

The Divine love has three attributes, or three essentials. First, the Lord desires to love others outside of Himself. Second, He desires to be one with them. Third, He desires to make them happy from Himself. These are the three things the Lord’s love desires. And His wisdom makes one with these ends or purposes, for from wisdom He created and governs the universe in such a way that these goals of the Divine love might be fulfilled.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the first of these three essentials and the other two. The first essential, the desire to love others outside of Himself, is fulfilled without the spiritual cooperation of people. As soon as a person is born, the Lord has another human being to love. As far as this first essential is concerned, it doesn’t matter whether the person turns out to be good or evil; the Lord still loves him with the whole of His infinite Divine love, whether that person becomes an angel or a devil.

The other two essentials, though, are not so easily fulfilled. Although the Lord desires to be conjoined with us and to make us happy, He cannot do either unless we cooperate with Him. The conjunction the Lord seeks with us is the conjunction of love, and this conjunction cannot occur unless we love Him in return. As for happiness, this is something we must accept in freedom. The Lord offers us happiness in many ways, but if we are bent upon making ourselves miserable, He can do nothing. He cannot force happiness upon us, for happiness walks hand in hand with freedom.

Because the Lord can neither be conjoined with us nor make us happy without our cooperation, He therefore strives in countless ways to encourage and secure this cooperation. The most obvious way in which He does this is through His written Word.

The Old and New Testaments speak of many things, but their overall purpose is simple. They teach about the Lord and His love for us so that we might love Him in return, and they teach and encourage us to live a life of good, so that we might be happy rather than miserable. In other words, the Old and New Testaments have as their essential purpose the fulfillment of the second and third essentials of the Divine love.

It is the same with the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, for it is equally the Lord’s Word. The Heavenly Doctrine is long—there are about 18,000 pages—and it speaks of many things, for it contains a wealth of heavenly wisdom for all time. But still, its overall message and purpose is simple. It tells us about the Lord, so that we can love Him, if we choose to. And it tells us how to live so that, if we want to, we can be happy. The New Church, based upon these teachings, is also very simple in essence. This church is nothing else than loving the Lord, and living the life that leads to heaven and happiness.

Now to reduce all the Heavenly Doctrine and the whole of the New Church to these two things might seem to be making things too simple. Obviously there is more to them than this, for otherwise the Heavenly Doctrine might have consisted of two simple sentences, rather than many volumes. Still, all the many things the Heavenly Doctrine says, and all the things involved in belonging to the New Church, have nevertheless a simple purpose—they are given so that we might love the Lord and live a life which leads to happiness. And these two issues are the two most profound and far-reaching in the whole of human existence.

When the Lord asks us to love Him and asks us to live a life which will make us happy, He is asking us to make the most important and momentous decision we will make to all eternity. The Lord asks us whether we believe in Him. And He asks if we will follow Him in our lives. The way we respond to these questions will determine the nature of our existence forever and ever.

There may be two questions, but there can be only one answer. Both questions must be answered the same way—either yes or no. Obviously we cannot say that yes, we will follow the Lord, if we have said that no, we do not believe in Him. But neither can we say that yes, we believe in the Lord, if we refuse to follow Him. If a person really believes in the Lord, not only with his mind but also with his heart, then it is impossible for him to refuse to follow the Lord. If a person really believes in the Lord, he will follow Him. If he doesn't follow the Lord in his life, then he doesn't really believe in Him.

Living in such a way that we can receive happiness from the Lord makes one with believing in Him. The life leading to happiness, conjoined with a belief in the Lord, who is the source of all happiness, is thus at the very heart of the Heavenly Doctrine, and at the very heart of religion.

The practical application of this is simple. We must know and we must live according to the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are the summary of how we must live if the Lord is to give us happiness. To order our lives according to these commandments should be of the greatest importance to us. All other matters and concerns are almost insignificant when it comes to the question of whether or not we are doing what the Decalogue teaches. These ten rules of life should be at the very center of our lives.

Because of this, it is wise for us to review the commandments periodically. We all know what they are, and have at least a general idea of what they mean. But even though we may know them, we can at times overlook them. We all know that we shouldn't covet, for example. But we can easily fail to remember this when we are feeling jealous at somebody else's good fortune. We all know that we shouldn't steal, and we also know that a person who doesn't do his work conscientiously is, in effect, stealing his wages. But do we think of this while we are making the mistake of being a little lazy at work? We all know we shouldn't kill even the reputation of someone else. But do we reflect on this when we gossip? The fact is, it is one thing to know the Ten Commandments; it is another thing to have them at the center of our minds constantly, so that we remember them when it matters. And we must remember them. To forget these commandments means to separate ourselves, internally, from the New Church. For to be of the New Church means to strive as hard as we can to live the way the Lord would wish us to live.

The importance of the Ten Commandments is made obvious time and time again throughout the Word. It is obvious from the fact that these commandments were the first part of the Old Testament to be written down. The Lord wrote these commandments on two tables of stone, and

He did this before the first five books of the Word were written down through Moses. The way in which the Decalogue was given also bears testimony to its importance. To give the Ten Commandments, the Lord came down in fire upon Mount Sinai, and the mountain smoked and trembled, and there were thunders, lightnings, a thick cloud, and the voice of a trumpet. Before the commandments were given, the people were sanctified for three days, and then bounds were set around Mount Sinai, lest anybody besides Moses come near it and die. Later, the tables of stone were placed in the ark, and they were kept in the tabernacle in the Holy of Holies. Miraculous powers were associated with these two tables of stone. By means of the ark, the waters of the Jordan were stopped, so that the people could enter the land of Canaan on dry ground. Also, it was by means of the ark that the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

In these and many other ways, the Old Testament stresses the overriding significance of the Ten Commandments. And the New Testament and the Heavenly Doctrine also do this; they teach the supreme importance of obeying what the Lord says in these ten rules of life.

And yet, for all this, the remarkable thing is that the Ten Commandments are so brief. They are only seventeen verses long. Some of the commandments are only two words long in Hebrew. And altogether there are only ten of these commandments. Human laws by which society is governed are so numerous that they fill volumes and require experts to administer them. But for the government of every conceivable aspect of spiritual life, the Lord has given us only ten simple rules. There is no evil whatsoever that is not forbidden by the Ten Commandments. Conversely, there is no heavenly good which cannot be attained through obeying them. Why, then, are so few commandments necessary?

It is true that the Decalogue involves more than the literal sense. We must obey not only the literal, but also the spiritual and celestial senses of the commandments. But even then, it is surprising how few commandments there are, and how the whole of heavenly life can be summarized in ten rules.

We all know that there are many different kinds of evils that tempt the human race. And most of us, surely, if we are honest, could list hundreds of different evils we have committed at one time or another. Yet the fact is that all the different evils that people ever have or ever could commit bear relation to only ten basic ones. The ten evils forbidden by the commandments are really the only evils there are, though they may take thousands, indeed millions, of different forms. Therefore, by fighting against each one of these evils in at least some way, we resist the whole spectrum of evil, and make it possible for the Lord to gradually remove from us the desire to commit any evil whatever.

The Ten Commandments, by containing the whole of heaven and standing in opposition to everything of hell, have tremendous power. And we can sense this power in two ways.

The power of the Ten Commandments is most apparent in their majesty. No human prose can be compared with the majestic words of the Decalogue. In them we can sense something of the awesome power and majesty of the Lord Himself, our absolute King, whom we must serve and obey.

At other times we experience the power of the commandments in another way. The Decalogue stands in absolute opposition to evil in any form. And we all love evil in some way or another.

None of us can really study these commandments without being made to feel guilty to some degree. They make everybody feel uncomfortable. Yet the fact that we may feel uncomfortable is unimportant. What is important is the way in which we react to this discomfort.

It is easy to ignore something which makes us feel uncomfortable. It is easy to invent excuses for avoiding something we do not want to face. But if we value our eternal destiny, then we must not ignore any of the Ten Commandments. If our lives do not measure up to these all-encompassing rules of life, and if we are thereby made to feel uncomfortable and guilty, then we must bravely accept that we have done wrong, that we have sinned. To acknowledge our mistakes is not the end of the world. Everybody has faults. Everybody has committed sins. But not all people can admit that they have sinned. Not all people have the courage to say that they have disobeyed the Lord's commandments. They make all kinds of excuses, rather than honestly admitting to themselves and to the Lord that they have done evil.

The reason we like to avoid admitting this is simple. Once we admit that we have done wrong, we must then compel ourselves to bring our lives into order. We must change the way we have been living. We must give up the evils we have been indulging in, even though we love committing them. We must mend our ways. It is as simple as that. No excuses we may dream up will exempt us from obeying the Lord.

The Lord knows we are not perfect. He knows that no person can intelligently and honestly evaluate his life according to the Decalogue and find that he is without sin. He does not demand perfection. As the Psalmist says: "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). On the other hand, the Lord expects us not to make excuses to avoid obedience. No person can deliberately excuse himself from obeying these rules of life and expect to be happy.

The Lord wants to make us happy, and therefore He has told us what to do to be happy. The Ten Commandments are nothing else than the Lord showing us the way to heaven and to eternal happiness. Stepping outside of these laws and obstinately seeking our own way to happiness, inevitably brings us frustration and unhappiness. It will bring us hell.

If we want to be conjoined with the Lord, if we want to be happy, if we want to go to heaven, then we must do what the Lord tells us to do in His Ten Commandments. The testimony of all Scripture, the essence of all religion is this: we must believe in the Lord and do what He says. This is the only path to heaven and to everlasting happiness. As the Lord Himself tells us:

Therefore you shall be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess (Deuteronomy 5:32-33).

Amen.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 5:22-33; John 15:7-14; *True Christian Religion* 287

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